

# *Sketch*

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## Wet Gringo

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## WET GRINGO

Rain, I think as I squat on the edge of the porch watching the clouds building over the forest, all those damn Amazonian trees transpiring and filling the atmosphere to saturation point with water vapor, and this is the dry season, they say, so what the hell is the explanation for all this rain I asked the man at the floating docks of Manaus specially engineered by Scots for the fifty-foot fluxes of the Amazon river level and the man said gringo it rains all the time here, it's just that we have less during the dry season, and I went away pissed, somehow feeling robbed of the sun because after all it's the tropics for Christ's sakes it's the equator, but I got used to the rain because it's always here and I am always wet and soon I forgot what dry was except when it is used to describe the season and then it means "less wet," and I learned not to care about my long hair being damp and the fungus on my feet and between my toes and in my crotch and in my armpits because it was always there and it always itched and it would not go away until I got dry, which I wouldn't because of all the places on this whole fucked-up planet I had decided to give up in the Amazon forest and forget what it means to be a gringo, no *senhora* I am *brasilian* and yes I have a strange accent because I like to talk funny and could you speak a little slower because I'm a little hard of hearing, which can happen to someone who for a long time hasn't heard much of any language other than that of the howler monkeys and the macaws and the caimans and this becomes the only

language I can speak fluently other than the languages of hunger and of pain in the head and intestines from the worms growing down in there and occasionally sending out a representative to ask for a little more paca meat for the fellows down there 'cause it's been such a long time since we had paca meat, but I always yank the bugger out and feel a rush of adrenaline, ha! one less of you in there to make a thousand more, but these are all a part of my day and I do not hate them because I have forgotten what it is like to be full in the stomach from something other than worms and milky-brown water, and what it is like to be dry. In Manaus they told me to pay a lot of money and see the forest, gringo, because that's why all you fuckers come here anyway because you want to see the forest that we keep burning down and you want to take pictures of us starving in the streets and why don't we take a bath you say because you've got the biggest river in the world flowing not five hundred feet from here and we tell you we are afraid of the pirhanas and when you go away we laugh, because we know you believe whatever the hell we want to tell you because we look dirty and poor and hungry and we smell so bad that you don't ask if you can take pictures of us you just do it anyway from further back, so I guess you could say we don't take baths so we can get your damn camera lens further than a foot from our faces when you take those pictures you later show your friends eating popcorn and potato chips and sitting in leather-backed chairs in your library and you amaze everyone with your photographic skills and how in the world did you ever

survive such a hellhole of a jungle and you neglect to tell them that you stayed in the Hotel Amazonas and paid 200 dollars a night to eat *filet mignon* in the air-conditioned dining room with the chandeliers and the plush red carpets and you tell your friends well, it was hard but we managed, and then you feel strong and powerful as you fool yourself into believing, really believing, your ability to survive in the Amazon, even if you don't speak the language and we have to learn to ask for money in German, French, Dutch, English, and Italian, so gringo take your damn pictures and give us some money and leave us alone. But I didn't take any pictures because I didn't have a camera and I didn't give beggars money because I didn't have enough money myself to buy one Coca-Cola, and the beggars looked at me, astounded, because I am a gringo and I have white skin under my dark tan and what I just told them doesn't seem possible from one who is from anywhere other than Manaus, but they look closer through the sheets of rain and realize that my shorts really aren't Jungle Brown Banana Republic Field Shorts but cut-off jeans that are so dirty from the seats of dug-out canoes and the floors of cargo boats slept on and the shit that leaks out of me while I sleep because of those damn parasites in my intestine that the cut-offs look brown, and that my hair really isn't short but in a long greasy ponytail with bits of rice and lice eggs in it, and that if they sniffed mildly they could smell me a hundred yards off, even through the stench of those closed streets of the market place in which we were standing, they looked at my bleary red eyes from lack of sleep and nights

of fever, and they smiled toothlessly and said hey gringo you look like us, and I fell on the street beside them and learned to beg for money in German, French, Dutch, English and Italian. But the rain kept falling, and when I had enough money to pay the bus driver who kept throwing me off the bus when I tried over and over to get a ride because he could tell by the way I smelled that I would not pay, I left that hole in civilization and took my parasites and fungi to the forest where we could all live together with nicer smells and cleaner water and land to grow food on instead of eating the stuff that falls from people's sandwiches into the gutters next to *Dany's*, and when I travelled far enough and floated on a log down a small river that might have had a name on one of those military governmental satellite-enhanced maps, I found a small hut on stilts in a clearing along the river's edge and climbed up into it and saw the bodies on the floor and knew from those expensive classes in some college in another world that it was probably cholera that left them lying together dead on the floor in a pool of shit and vomit, and the woman holding the baby was partly eaten by something sitting in the corner watching me, so I left the hut and spent the night on the log by the river which was a dumb thing to do when there are caimans around but I couldn't spend the night in the hut, and after I cleaned the place up a little and moved the bodies the next day, it was still a week before I could feel at home inside that hut at night, out of the moonlight and inside where I could rot in the dampness of my clothing and try and get some sleep because the next day I

would plant manihot and bananas and catch a paca in the forest for the worms way down there inside me. And I squat here on the edge of the porch each afternoon as the rain clouds build from the transpiration of those damn Amazon trees and occasionally I get a visitor, some Indian or *seringeiro* passing by along the river who seems surprised that I'm not the woman with the baby who usually greets them when they pass and offers them rice and fish for dinner, but I offer them rice and fish for dinner also and they accept of course because it's stupid to refuse food that you don't pay for with money or hard work, and usually by the second visit they forget how they first thought I was a gringo and had a funny accent, because a gringo would never be here like this, because who would if they didn't have to? And when the rain outside stops for a while and my company returns to his canoe and the river and the forest, I go back to my porch and squat on the edge and watch the manihot grow and try to remember what a book was like and what snow was like and I see another cloud coming and I think uh-oh, it looks like the wet season is starting; guess I'll really get wet now.

*Scot Kelchner*